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ABSTRACT

Materials for teaching reading comprehension in a widely used intermediate grade basal reading series were analyzed as part of a larger study. This report concentrates on the genre of the selections and on the sequencing of instruction in questions related to the comprehension skill, drawing conclusions. Results of the analyses suggested that the series provided a well-balanced selection of genres and facilitated the mechanics of teacher/pupil interaction within the specific skill lessons. There was also a well-developed management system which could provide opportunities for diagnostic teaching. Questions were raised about the length of the stimuli and the type of content in the specific skill lessons, as well as about the lack of match between the task expected of students in the instructional exercises and that required in the assessment selections. (AA)

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Analysis of Comprehension Practices in a Basal Series at the Intermediate Level

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by

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A Paper presented at the 22nd Annual Convention of the IRA
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> They can attack words, but they don't understand.
> They can read their basals, but they can't read
> their content textbooks.
> We need to spend more time on teaching comprehension.

Most of you, I am sure, have heard expressions like the ones above; you may even have said something similar yourself. We are concerned that in today's society so many of our school children (as well as adults) seem to have difficulty, not only in reading critically, but in obtaining literal information from the printed page. All of us, classroom teachers, teachers of teachers, and researchers, seem to share in this concern. We need only look through the IRA program at the number of sessions devoted to comprehension to reinforce our view that reading comprehension is our number one priority in reading education today.

What is happening in our schools--specifically in the intermediate grades--to teach children to comprehend? Although it would be interesting to observe in classrooms to gain some insight into answers to that question,

CS003 379

we felt that an initial step was an analysis of the materials and programs used in an overwhelming number of school systems throughout the United States, that is, the basal series. MacGinite, in an article entitled "Research Suggestions from the 'Literature Search'," suggests as a first step the analysis of current materials "to assess the range of cognitive demands, locate the most frequently required operations, and compare the demands of different types of programs."[1]

We would suggest an even more complete analysis which includes a study of the vocabulary load, syntactic complexity, language, questioning strategies, content, as well as the cognitive demands of the material. During the past year, Dr. Beck and I have been working on such an analysis. As my colleague (in a prior presentation) explained, we selected Houghton Mifflin, a widely used basal series for our initial analysis; however, it is our intention to study other series so that a comparison of the instructional demands can be made.

It was my responsibility to analyze the intermediate levels of Houghton Mifflin while Dr. Beck concentrated on the primary levels. Because of the constraints of time, we decided to select for today's session several aspects of our analysis which we think particularly revealing and interesting. Therefore, at the intermediate level, I will be discussing genre and the sequencing of one specific comprehension skill, that of drawing conclusions.

Genre

Using the same classification system as that utilized by Beck, we analyzed the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade materials (levels K, L, M)

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[1]MacGinite, Walter H. "Research Suggestions from the 'Literature Search'," Reading Research Quarterly, Volume XI, No. 1, 1975-76, p. 16.

of the Houghton Mifflin Series (1976) as to genre. There are 72 fiction selections and 87 non-fiction selections in the three levels. Non-fiction selections include biography, exposition, autobiography, and argument. Exposition selections could be classified as either (a) general information or (b) reading skills development. In each of the three levels, ten skill development selections are included. In these selections, students read materials which inform them about specific skills such as drawing conclusions, using a card catalogue, making and using an outline, reading maps, etc. There are also 41 poetry selections and 16 selections classified as Riddles and Puzzles. As in the primary level, initially the teacher reads the poetry to the students; however, at the intermediate level, the students are then given many different opportunities to read the poetry aloud. Indeed, many different suggestions for instruction are presented. It is obvious that there is great variety in the kinds of literary selections available in these textbooks. Each unit of which there are five in each text contains several stories, articles, poems, and skill lessons. Students are exposed to a wide range of reading materials of different content and style. Many of the selections are adapted and/or reprinted from larger selections, and are written by well-known writers of children's literature. There are several Newbery Award winners, including Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell, Carry On, Mr. Bowditch by Jean Latham, and--And Now Miguel by Joseph Krumgold.

Selections which portray members of different minority and ethnic groups in many different roles are included in this series. Obviously, Houghton Mifflin has made an attempt to answer the criticism of previous basals in regard to sexual and racial stereotypes. The selections also cover a wide range of geographic areas and historical times. There are myths, folk tales and legends from a number of different countries and cultures.

The intermediate program as well as the primary program then is well balanced as to genre. This series exposes the reader to many different kinds of literature and should appeal to children of different backgrounds and interests.

Specific Skills

One of the most interesting aspects of the analysis at the intermediate level was that of tracing the sequencing of a specific comprehension skill. In this basal series, as in any other, scope and sequence of skills have been developed and learning experiences provided for the teaching of each of the skills. It is important in developing a sequence that the instructional experiences reflect the changes in the child and that the experiences build on previous learnings to provide for subsequent ones. In the Houghton Mifflin Series, there are a total of 63 skills listed as comprehension skills in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade materials. Furthermore, there are 64 Reference and Study

Skills and 42 Literary Skills. I felt it important to mention the Literary Skills and Reference and Study Skills as well as skills listed as Comprehension Skills since the former two categories may be very critical to success in reading content textbooks in the intermediate grades. Also, we are concerned about the existence of an artificial dichotomy between skill types: rather, we are interested in analyzing all of those skills which may contribute to effective reading comprehension. Certainly this series has a large number of skills at the intermediate level which relate to reading comprehension. Indeed, one wonders whether such a large number of skills might not become unwieldy and unmanageable for the teacher. We have not yet been able to identify the skills of comprehension, yet publishers persist in developing long lists of specific skills which may or may not affect the development of comprehension.

During the past months, we have been analyzing several specific comprehension skills; however, for the purpose of this paper, we will follow or trace one skill, that of drawing conclusions, through the three intermediate levels. As we studied the materials, we found some very interesting patterns.

1. At all three levels, this series provided the same sequence of instruction for the skill, drawing conclusions. This cycle includes pre-assessment, instructional experiences, practice in a workbook, post-assessment, reteaching, reassessment, maintenance or further practice in a workbook, and application (the student is guided in using the skill in a selection(s) in his textbook). This flow cycle which is used for teaching all skills attempts to provide for the individual differences

in children within the classroom by including several instructional lessons, assessment measures, and reteaching exercises which can be used if deemed necessary by the teacher. Interestingly, there seems to be much more emphasis on assessment rather than on instruction. We found a very structured pattern in the assessment sections. Each of the nine assessment tests analyzed contained four problems or stimulus paragraphs to which students responded. One wonders, however, about the adequacy of the instructional tasks. There were eight instructional selections in the materials for grades four, five, and six--this includes the instructional and reteaching sections. We found a range from one to four in numbers of paragraphs within the selections, with most of the selections containing only one paragraph. Obviously, there is very little instruction in the instructional selections! Furthermore, there is little difference between the initial instructional experience and the reteaching exercises. If a child exhibits difficulty with drawing conclusions after the initial instructional experience, one wonders whether one more similar exercise really facilitates learning? Might it be more effective if different kinds of strategies were provided for reteaching?

2. At every level, the student is informed as to what he is learning to do. He is told to "use the information that a writer gives you to find out other things that you are not told."[2] In all of the instructional experiences, the student is walked through the instruction with the teacher and is asked to give a rationale for each of his answers. One might commend the writers of this series for their efforts in helping readers define what it is they are learning and for reinforcing this understanding throughout the series. Opportunities to develop thinking

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[2]Teachers Guide, Impressions . New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1976, p. 264.

skills of students through peer and teacher-pupil interaction are impressive. One can find support for this social interaction in the study done by Rothkopf, in which he found that "periodic contacts with a teacher-like person during reading can increase the effectiveness of study activities."[3] This procedure of actively involving the students in responding to the various selections is suggested in the instruction as well as in the reteaching sections of this series.

3. An interesting aspect of this series is the differing demand of the assessment selections (pre, post and reassessment) from the instructional and practice selections. In all but one of the eight instructional sections, the student is asked to give, either in writing or orally, a short answer (and the clues which helped him/her make a choice). In all of the nine assessment measures, the task is to select the best answer, i.e., a forced-choice response. Generally, the student is given three distractors following the paragraph. One wonders whether it might be more appropriate to test what he has been teaching; that is, given the data, can the student draw the conclusion and give the rationale for his choice. As it is in the series, the student is asked to perform a different task in the testing exercises than he is in the instructional selections.

4. One of the primary foci in analyzing the skill, Drawing Conclusions, was that of the content of the selections in each of the levels. I analyzed 72 problems or stimulus paragraphs and found that the content of all but four of the paragraphs consisted of common experiences such as games, modes of travel, and various play activities. It seems that some attempt should be made to vary the content so that children can practice drawing conclusions in various

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[3]Rothkopf, Ernest A. and Richard D. Bloom. "Effects of Interpersonal Interaction on the Instructional Value of Adjunct Questions in Learning from Written Material," Journal of Educational Psychology, 1970, Vol. 61, No. 6, 1970, p. 421.

types of content materials rather than asking them to read about concepts and occurrences which are so common-place that little thinking is required. In some activities, the content is so simplistic that the student need not read more than the first few lines to draw the conclusion. To illustrate, let us use a paragraph from the manual Keystone, the fifth grade text.

> For about five minutes after takeoff, it climbed steadily. As it leveled off, some signs in the cabin went out, signaling that seat belts could be unfastened. Eric settled back in his seat. He looked through the breaks in the clouds at the tiny roads and farms far below him.[4]

How much did you have to read to determine where Eric is? The student is told to read the paragraph and then is asked if the paragraph tells him where Eric is. Given no as an answer, the teacher is told to elicit from the student details which can be used as clues to determine the answer. The following details are listed in the manual: "takeoff, climbed steadily, leveled off, some signs in the cabin, seat belts, looked through the break in the clouds at roads and farms far below."[5] One might assume that this would be the type of content provided in earlier levels, and that the content would become increasingly more challenging to the student as he proceeds through the series so that he could practice the skill of drawing conclusions in many different kinds and styles of written material. This does not happen. In the sixth grade textbook, the content of the instructional lesson includes a walk on the beach, garbage collection, and a babysitting situation. The content in these selections do not seem to reflect the growing maturity of the reader.

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[4]Teacher's Manual, Keystone, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1976, p. 249.

[5]Ibid., p. 250.

5. Another area of interest is length of selection. In Table 1, the average number of words in the instructional, practice, and testing (both pre and post) selections is listed.

Table 1

Average Number of Words in the Instructional, Practice, and Pre-and Post-Test Selections in the Intermediate Levels of the Houghton Mifflin Basal Series

	Level K	Level L	Level M
Instructional			
Student Text	137.6		
Manual		49.0	74.3
Practice Pages (two at each level)	105.2	72.1	29.4
Testing			
Pre-Test	42.8	61.5	78.5
Post-Test	79	57.0	55.8

Note that the longest selections in instructional exercises appear in the fourth grade materials, with some increase in length between the fifth and sixth grade materials. The practice pages appear to be sequenced, but with the longest selections appearing in the earliest level! The testing selections, however, particularly the pre-test exercises, appear to be somewhat consistent in length. In analyzing the number of sentences in the same selections, we found the same inconsistency. I believe that some attempt should be made to systematically regulate the amount of material to be read so that the developing reader can practice integrating bits of information from larger and larger pieces of written material.

The authors of the series do state in the scope and sequence chart that students are given many opportunities to practice the skill, drawing conclusions, through the questions which are presented after each story. If the teacher assumes responsibility for teaching the skill of drawing conclusions during the follow-up discussion, then children will be able to practice the skill in many different kinds of materials. However, I believe that a systematic approach to length of materials as well as a systematic approach to including materials of varying concept difficulty should exist within the specific skill lessons themselves. Not only would this insure practice in varying lengths of materials, but it would encourage the authors of a series to develop very different kinds of instructional and practice exercises. The "sameness" of the instructional and practice exercises may encourage students to "tune-out." We have all seen students who can quickly analyze the task, and zip through the assignment with very little reading, and even less thinking!

I should mention that in the application step of the flow cycle, the authors do provide questions related to a specific story in the student text which requires students to draw conclusions for that story. Would that there could be more of this; however, there is only one application lesson in each of the three levels. It would be my hope that more of this type of instruction could be incorporated into reading programs.

Our findings reveal a heavy commitment to a specific skills model of comprehension, one that focuses on identifying and teaching a large number of discrete skills. We have not been able thus far in our analysis of this series to determine any systematic plan for sequencing the cognitive and conceptual tasks

to provide for individual differences. There is little variation in the directions and in the response expected of students in the instructional and reteaching exercises. The content changes, but the conceptual load appears to remain the same. Therefore, if a student has difficulty in drawing conclusions, he is given more of the same.

We have examined several dimensions of a series which provides a well balanced genre of selections and which encourages and facilitates the mechanics of teacher-pupil interaction within the specific skill lessons. In this series, we also found a well developed management system which could provide opportunities for diagnostic teaching. We have raised some questions, however, about the length of the stimuli and the type of content in the specific skill lessons at the intermediate levels. We have some concerns about the apparent emphasis on assessment and on the match between the task expected of students in the instructional exercises as compared to the assessment selections.

Obviously, there are more variables to consider than the basal text when one is examining the instructional practices within classrooms; however, it is our belief that this kind of analysis is a necessary first step that will enable us to specify the instructional tasks we are demanding of students, to see if these tasks are appropriate, and then to make the modifications in reading programs which will facilitate instruction in comprehension.

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